

NEWS RELEASE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region
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For Immediate Release

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Service Proposes to List Two Rare Utah Plants as Threatened Species, Extend Critical Habitat Protections

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is seeking input on a proposal to protect the Graham's beardtongue (*Penstemon grahamii*) and White River beardtongue (*Penstemon scariosus* var. *albifluvis*) as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). We also propose to designate critical habitat for these two species. Both species are endemic to oil shale soils, which are at high risk of loss due to energy development.

Graham's beardtongue is a perennial plant known from the Uintah Basin in Utah and Colorado. This species is susceptible to impacts from energy exploration and development, as well as the cumulative impacts of increased energy development, livestock grazing, invasive weeds, and climate change. We are proposing to designate about 68,000 acres as critical habitat for Graham's beardtongue in 5 units with 66 percent of the ownership Federal and the remaining split between state and private lands. All of these units are occupied.

White River beardtongue is also found only in the Uintah basin in Utah and Colorado. The species faces similar threats as Graham's beardtongue but may be more vulnerable due to its even smaller population sizes. We are proposing to designate about 15,000 acres as critical habitat for White River beardtongue in 3 units, with 47 percent of the ownership private, 39 percent Federal, and the remaining state lands. All of these units are occupied.

The ESA requires the Service to identify the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species, which the ESA terms "critical habitat." This identification helps Federal agencies identify actions that may affect listed species or their habitat, and to work with the Service to avoid or minimize those impacts. Identifying this habitat also helps raise awareness of the habitat needs of imperiled species and focus the conservation efforts of other partners such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual landowners.

Although non-federal lands have initially been included in these areas, activities on these lands are not affected now, and will not necessarily be affected if the species is protected under the ESA in the future. Only if an activity is authorized, funded or carried out by a federal agency will the agency need to work with the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to listed species or their identified habitat.

The final decision to add the Grahams and White River beardtongues to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, as well as the final identification of areas containing habitat essential to the species, will be based on the best scientific information available. In addition, the Service will use an economic analysis to inform and refine its identification of this habitat. Only areas that contain habitat essential to the conservation of the species, and where the benefits of this habitat outweigh potential economic impacts, will be included in the final identification.

The Service will open a 60-day public comment period on August 6, 2013 to allow the public to review and comment on the proposal and provide additional information. The comment period for both rules closes on October 7, 2013. All relevant information received from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties will be considered and addressed in the agency's final listing determination for the species and identification of habitat essential to its conservation.

A copy of the proposed listing rule, proposed critical habitat designation, and other information about Graham's beardtongue and White River beardtongue are available on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/plants/2utahbeardtongues/>, or by contacting the Utah Ecological Services Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2369 West Orton Circle, Suite 50, West Valley City, UT 84119, phone 801-975-3330. The proposed listing and proposed critical habitat designation is published in today's Federal Register. For general information on critical habitat please visit: http://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/critical_habitat.pdf.

Native plants are important for their ecological, economic, and aesthetic values. Plants play an important role in development of crops that resist disease, insects, and drought. At least 25 percent of prescription drugs contain ingredients derived from plant compounds, including medicine to treat cancer, heart disease, juvenile leukemia, and malaria, and to assist in organ transplants. Plants are also used to develop natural pesticides.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/>. Connect with our Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/USFWSMountainPrairie>, follow our tweets at <http://twitter.com/USFWSMttnPrairie>, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwsmttnprairie/>